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EARLY TRANSPORTATION IN WASHTENAW COUNTY BY ROAD

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In Washtenaw County, as in all other parts of the country, there have been three successive groups of roadbuilders. First came the animals, primarily buffaloes and deer, then the Indians took over many of the animal trails, and made some other and longer ones of their own. Finally the white men came, first sharing and then taking over and improving the Indian trails until in time they became wagon roads and then motor roads. Thus the original locating engineer of many of our great modern highways was a buffalo or a deer. So remarkable was their engineering instinct that many railways as well as highways follow very closely the old buffalo trails, and I am told that even today when a forester has to cross some difficult bit of north woods terraine, such as a swamp, he hunts for a deer path to follow, knowing that it will be the best way across.

Indian Trails

Except for those followed during seasonal migrations, most animal trails were local in character, as from feeding grounds and salt licks to water, but the Indians had trails some of which were hundreds of miles in length. One such was the Great Trail from Port Pitt to Detroit, where it connected with the Sauk Trail, running through Ypsilanti to Chicago. At Chicago the Sauk Trail connected with the Sault and Green Bay Trail to Lake Superior, and with others to the west. At Detroit it also connected with the Montreal Trail into Canada (now Ontario 2), with the Saginaw Trail running northwest through Saginaw to Mackinac (now US 10), and with the Grand River Trail to Grand Rapids (now US 16). Thus the Sauk Trail, through Washtenaw County, was an important part of a great transcontinental Indian thoroughfare.

A branch of the Great Trail ran from Monroe up the River Raisin and then up the Saline River to the salt springs, in Washtenaw County, where it joined the Sauk Trail.

The Potawatomie, or Territorial Trail, led from the mouth of the Huron River up that stream to a crossing of the Sauk Trail at Ypsilanti, thence through Ann Arbor and Battle Creek to a second junction with the Sauk Trail near Lake Michigan. A branch of the

Potawatomie Trail followed the Huron River to Portage Lake.

Thus the most important Indian trails in this county were the Sauk Trail, now US 112, and the Potawatomie Trail, now US 12, with a branch which is now the Dexter and Portage Lake Road. These were all still primarily Indian trails when Ann Arbor was founded in 1824, though some of them at least (as the Sauk Trail) had been shared by the white man for more than half a century. *

Early Roads

For more than a century after Detroit was founded, in 1701, there were no roads in Michigan except the Indian trails. In some places these may have been improved slightly by the white man, and there were probably some locations where settlers cut short trails of their own, but as late as 1816, history records no white man's road in the whole territory, and in 1812, General Hull was able to march his troops only four miles a day along the Great Trail between Ohio and Detroit.

As a matter of fact, even at that comparatively late date, there probably was not a real wagon road west of the Appalachian Mountains and north of the Ohio River. The Hudson and Mohawk valleys had always offered a physically possible route around the mountain wall that hemmed in the colonies, but that region was inhabited by the warlike Iroquois Indians, who had the playful habit of lifting the scalps of travelers, and this rather effectively discouraged white emigration by that route until after 1800.

In 1750 Dr. Thomas Walker discovered the Indian Trail passing through Cumberland Gap to the rich bluegrass region of Kentucky, and in 1775 the Wilderness Road following that trail was laid out by Daniel Boone. Thousands of settlers poured into Kentucky over that road during the latter part of the eighteenth century, but there was no direct wagon route from the Middle Atlantic states to the west until the National Pike, an excellent macadam road connecting the Potomac and Ohio Rivers, was completed to Wheeling in 1818. In the same year the first steamboat, the Walk-in-the-Water, arrived in Detroit, and the flood of western migration was started.

Michigan Roads

The Territory of Michigan was organized in 1805, and on September 18 of that year the Governor and the Judges passed "an Act Concerning Highways and Roads." Aside from general matters it provided for the laying out and opening of "two permanent, public roads, avenues, or highways," one of which appears to have been Gratiot

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*The information on Indian trails was taken from A. B. Hulbert's "Historic Highways of America. Indian Thoroughfares." (Cleveland, Ohio: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1902), and W. B. Hinsdale's "Trade and Lines of Overland Travel of the Michigan Indians" (a paper read at the Geography Conference of the Mich. Schoolmasters Club, Apr.,1929)

Avenue, which was to be six miles long, and the other, Woodward Avenue, one mile long. Three years later a most interesting act was passed, providing for a lottery to raise $6000 for a road "from the City of Detroit to the foot of the rapids of the river Miami, which enters Lake Erie." History seems to record nothing further regarding this venture.

In 1816, the Secretary of War ordered the Army to build a military road from Detroit to Ft. Meigs, on the Maumee River just above the present site of Toledo. Troops under General Macomb did some work on this road and "for the 4 quarter 1817" the soldiers received $400.50 in cash and 2,650 gills of whiskey, at a cost of three cents a gill, for their extra efforts as road-builders, cash payments being at the rate of 15 cents a day. The results of this work seem to have been of little consequence. but in 1824 Congress authorized the construction of the road, which was carried out under the direction of Lewis Cass and completed in 1829,- the first graded and drained wagon road in Michigan.

Washtenaw County Roads

Mrs. Alvin Cross, who came to Washtenaw County in 1824, in writing about the settlement the year before of Woodruff's Grove, adjoining Ypsilanti, said,

> He (Benjamin Woodruff) then purchased a boat, which was their only means of procuring supplies of provisions, lumber, etc., until fall, when a road was cut through to Detroit. *

Cutting this road was the earliest white man's roadbuilding activity in the county, and was briefly described by Hon. L. D. Norris as follows:

> The most noted (road) of them all, the Chicago and Detroit, was first cut through toward Ypsilanti, in advance of the first ox team by pioneer John Bryan, reaching the Huron at Woodruff's Grove, on the night of the 23d of October, 1823. **

Another first for John Bryan was being the father of Alpha Washtenaw Bryan, first white child born in the county.

Speaking of the Woodruff's Grove of 1824, Mr. Norris said, "Roads were cut in different directions and a landing made for boats where Rawsonville now is." Evidently these were very short roads confined to the immediate neighborhood.

Father Gabriel Richard, who with Judge Woodward and Rev. John Monteith had founded the original University of Michigan in Detroit in 1817, has been called Michigan's first good roads advocate. In 1824, he was territorial delegate in Congress and on March 2 of that year he moved that the Committee on Roads and Canals be instructed to investigate the expediency of constructing a road from Detroit to Chicago. The motion was carried and the

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* History of Washtenaw County, Michigan. Chicago: Chas. C. Chapman & Co., 1881: p.451.
** Ibid., p.528.

following January, $3000 was appropriated for a survey and Orange Risdon was employed as engineer.

The survey followed the old Sauk Trail from Detroit to Ypsilanti and Saline, then to Tecumseh, Jonesville, and on to Chicago. The engineer's report was transmitted to Congress, January 28, 1926. Two months later, Hon A. E. Wing of Monroe, then territorial delegate in Congress and later the builder of the Detroit-Ft. Meigs Road, wrote a letter to the chairman of the Committee on Roads and Canals, setting forth the advantages of building the Chicago Road. The road was authorized, and the Detroit Gazette of June 4, 1827, carried an advertisement for bids on the first section "beginning at the first 1-4 mile post on the south side of the river Rouge, near Ten Eyck's Bridge (so-called), and extending to the first 1-4 mile post south of Willow Run (so called)." Charles Gratiot, who was in charge of all military roads in Michigan, was chief engineer.

For some reason, contracts were not let until 1829, but by the end of 1830, about 64 miles had been completed, making the first road across Washtenaw County.

> The road is described as follows by Carl E. Pray: *
> Until 1830...it was a good four days' work for an ox team to haul a load from Detroit to Ypsilanti. In 1830 a team with a load of goods reached Ann Arbor from Detroit in three days, apparently a record up to that time. An officer who was sent to look after Indian affairs in Wisconsin came by this route in 1831 and reports a "graded road" to Ypsilanti which was covered in one day. The road was an almost continuous causeway from Detroit to within three miles of Ypsilanti. Earth had been thrown over the logs laid crossways of the road making it unusually good for a wilderness road. Where there had not been time to cover the logs with earth the road was called "corduroy," and since wagons had no springs and balloon tires had not been invented it is easy to imagine the thumping and bumping the traveler was subjected to. The traveler mentioned above was treated to "good fare" at Ypsilanti and "a choice of the softest boards on the bar room floor" for his bed during the night. The road had been worked between Ypsilanti and Saline. "Then came turnpike jobbers, some clearing, some ploughing and scraping, and jobs not yet commenced." From Clinton the road was merely a wagon track or an Indian trail. He usually found a house or an Indian trader's hut to put up at for the night.

The work was delayed by Indian scares and by a cholera epidemic during which Governor Mason was arrested in Ypsilanti for violating a regulation prohibiting anyone from entering the town. The available records are not clear as to just when the road was completed

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* "An Historic Michigan Road," Michigan History Magazine, v.11: 325-341, July, 1927.

to Chicago, but it seems to have been at least passable for vehicles to that point by 1833.

Professor Pray states further, in the same paper:

> By 1830 a semi-weekly stage line was running from Detroit to Ypsilanti and Tecumseh. In 1832 it was extended to Niles, in 1833 a line was established between Niles and Chicago. By 1835 there were daily stages running directly between Detroit and Chicago and the demand for passage was so great that reservations had to be made in advance, in fact seats in the stage became objects of speculation. Soon there was a double daily stage running and extra wagons were put on to carry the travelers.

Farmer's map pf 1836 shows a road branching off at Saline and going via Clinton to join the Chicago Road again at what is probably Cambridge Junction. This is the present route of US 112 and is, of course, shorter than the original road via Tecumseh.

The development of the Chicago Road during the 1830's put Ypsilanti and Saline on the great emigrant route which included steamship travel from Buffalo to Detroit.

On November 4, 1829, the territorial government authorized two roads to be built through Washtenaw County, as follows:

> 1. Commencing at the bridge over the Clinton River, in the village of Pontiac, and running from thence on the north side of Pine Lake, on the east side of Orchard Lake, and on the north side of Walled Lake, to the village of Ann Arbor, thence on the most direct and eligible route by the Saline Springs, to village of Tecumseh, thence to Adrian.
>
> 2. Commencing in Chicago Road at or near the Inn of Timothy S. Sheldon, in the township of Plymouth, in county of Wayne, thence west on the most direct and eligible route through the village of Ann Arbor, by Samuel Clements, to Grand River where the St. Joseph Trail crosses the same, and also through the Cohgwagiac and Grand Praries, thence westerly on the most eligible route to, or near the Paw Paw, to the mouth of St. Joseph River of Lake Michigan; and Seeley Neal, Orrin White, and Jehiel Enos are appointed commissioners to lay out and establish same.
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> The commissioners are ordered to make return March 3, 1831.

There seems to be no available information as to the surveying and building of the Pontiac Road, and only parts of it are shown on Burr's map of 1839, but there are several pages of detailed description of the location of the second, or "Territorial Road," in the 1881 History of Washtenaw County.

Sheldon's Tavern apparently stood where the Chicago Road crossed the Rouge River just east of "Dearbornville." The Territorial Road followed what is now called the Ann Arbor Trail to Plymouth, and then the present route of US 12 from there to Lake Michigan - another case of the white man's road following the Indian's trail. Orrin White of Ann Arbor was one of the commissioners appointed to lay out the road.

The importance of both the Chicago Road and the Territorial Road began to wane with the coming of the railroad. Trains from Detroit to Ypsilanti in 1838, to Jackson in 1843, to Kalamazoo in 1846, and to Lake Michigan in 1849, where they connected with steamers to Chicago. Thus the stagecoach was eliminated as a necessary link in through travel from Detroit to Chicago sixteen years after it was first established between these points.

Washtenaw County Roads in 1839

In addition to the two great roads passing through Washtenaw County, Burr's 1839 map shows several of lesser importance. Three of them radiated from Ypsilanti, one going to Ann Arbor, one following the north bank of the Huron River to a junction with the Detroit-Toledo Road at Brown's Town, now Flat Rock, and the third, now the Whittaker Road, going southwest to a junction with La Plaisance Road (Milan Road) from Saline to Monroe. The North Territorial Road is largely omitted from Burr's map, but Mitchell's map, of the same year, shows it going from Plymouth to Dixboro to Dexter, which was probably an error as it is actually about three miles north of both Dixboro and Dexter. The situation is rather confusing because of the differences between these two maps of the same date, and because the names of the majority of small places shown on both have been changed. Salem, or a point a mile south of there, was known as Riders. Both maps show a road from Dexter to Unadilla, in the northwest corner of the county, but Mitchell shows the road from Dexter to Ann Arbor, while Burr shows it going south to Scio, on the Territorial Road, with only a trail from Dexter to Ann Arbor. Scio, of course, is actually on the river. In addition to the roads previously mentioned, the Burr map, which is much more detailed than Mitchell's, shows a road from Clinton to Manchester and then west across Jackson and Calhoun Counties.

Also there was a road from Dexter to Webster to Northfield, which was southwest of Green Oak and may have been the village of Whitmore Lake. It was at the intersection of the Dexter-Pontiac Road and a road from Plymouth, via Riders, to Pinckney and beyond, probably the Seven Mile Road.

Washtenaw County Trails

In addition to these roads, Burr shows a number of trails or cross-roads, most of them radiating from Ann Arbor. One was the beginning of the Pontiac Road. Burr takes it only to Riders, but Mitchell shows it as a road from Ann Arbor to Pontiac to "Old Ft. St. Clair." Another went to Northfield, probably present US 23, and a third went northwest to Webster. South of Ann Arbor there

was a trail to Saline with a branch west, probably the present Town Line Road, and another branch from Lodi to Columbia Lake and Manchester. Unless Burr is wrong, most of this branch has disappeared but it probably included that part of the Manchester road west of Bridgewater.

About half way between Saline and Clinton was a place called Benton, from which one trail went southwest to Tecumseh and another west and southwest to Nelsonville, which was on the county line east of Wamplers Lake. I find no trace of these trails on a modern road map. From Manchester a trail went northwest through Sharon to Grass Lake, and in the opposite direction it joined the Benton-Nelsonville trail.

That was the road situation in Washtenaw County a little more than a century ago. In locating these old roads on a modern map, they can often be identified by the fact that usually they do not follow section lines.

According to John T. Blois' 1838 Gazetteer of Michigan, mail was carried between Ypsilanti and Plymouth, a distance of 15 miles, weekly, although neither Burr nor Mitchell shows any road or trail between these two points. Such a road was authorized in 1836 but the act was repealed in 1837. This was Michigan mail route No. 7. Others in this county were as follows; all have weekly trips.

8. Saline and Grass Lake via Columbia Lake and Richfield, 27 mi.
9. Saline and London via York, 15 mi. (York was north and London south of Milan.)
14. Plymouth and Dexter via Riders, Northfield, Webster, 28 mi.
15. Ann Arbour (sic) and Pontiac via Northfield, Green Oak, Lyon and Walled Lake, 48 mi.
16. Ann Arbour and Ionia via Dexter, Sterling, North Lake and Unadilla, 96 mi.
38. Northfield and Howell, via Hamburgh, 17 mi.

There were 42 such routes in Michigan, apparently in addition to railroad mail service. The villages in the county were listed as Ann Arbour, Ypsilanti, Dexter, and Saline; the total population was 20,176.

Plank Roads

There was apparently little provision for the maintenance of any roads in Michigan and even the most important ones were often in a most deplorable condition. As an example, Miss Ina B. Palmer, in "Wagon Roads in Michigan, 1826-36", states that

> At the close of this decade, the main travelled highway from Detroit to Chicago was in poor condition between Detroit and Ypsilanti, a distance of about thirty miles. The road had been made through a low, heavily timbered, and in some places marshy country... In 1837 the road was literally worn out. Horses and loaded wagons sank deep in the mud, and it was dif-

> ficult for wagons heavily laden to pass over it. B. K. Pierce, Lieutenant-Colonel of the United States Army, who inspected this road, said it was difficult to make this portion of the road good, consequently it would be expensive to repair the road according to the original design. His estimate was placed at $500 per mile for necessary repairs. From Ypsilanti to the Indiana line the country was generally high and open, and the roads were good.

To meet this situation, a number of private toll road companies were organized. These were usually called "plank road companies," although the roads were often built of gravel. In 1900 Mr. D. Farrand Henry made a toll road appraisal for Dean M. E. Cooley, and the Henry report is our best source of information regarding the so-called plank roads. This report begins:

> In the year 1837 when Michigan was admitted as a State, a charter was granted the Detroit, Plymouth and Ann Arbor Turnpike for a "timber road made of good well hewn timber when the alluvial nature of the soil shall render the same necessary." The timbers were to be twenty-four feet long, laid side by side and even at the top. This certainly was a great improvement on the corduroy but it must have been expensive and but little of it appears to have been laid, though several charters for "timber roads" were granted.

Thirteen years later two more plank roads were chartered, parts of which were in Washtenaw County. These were the Detroit and Saline, and the Monroe and Saline roads. The latter cost $42,376 and at one time had an annual income of $2,345, but the last report was made in 1853. The Detroit and Saline Road cost $66,759, and 18 miles between Detroit and Wayne were still in operation in 1900 with five very old toll houses. There was at that time a superintendent or engineer at $55 per month and five gatekeepers at $29 per month. The road consisted of one mile of plank and 17 miles of gravel, the roadway being 20 feet wide. The gross income was $1200 per year, the maintenance $1200, and the net income 0. The original length of the toll road was 50 miles.

In 1852 and 1853 the following six roads were chartered: Ann Arbor and Lodi, Ann Arbor and Howell, Ann Arbor and Whitmore, Dexter and Mason, Stockbridge and Chelsea, and Ypsilanti and York. So far as indicated in the report, only the Ann Arbor and Lodi road was actually built. It cost $10,250 and in 1900 it was a gravel road five miles long, 12 feet wide, and in good condition. There was one toll house, which was located on South Main Street, roughly opposite the American Legion Home.

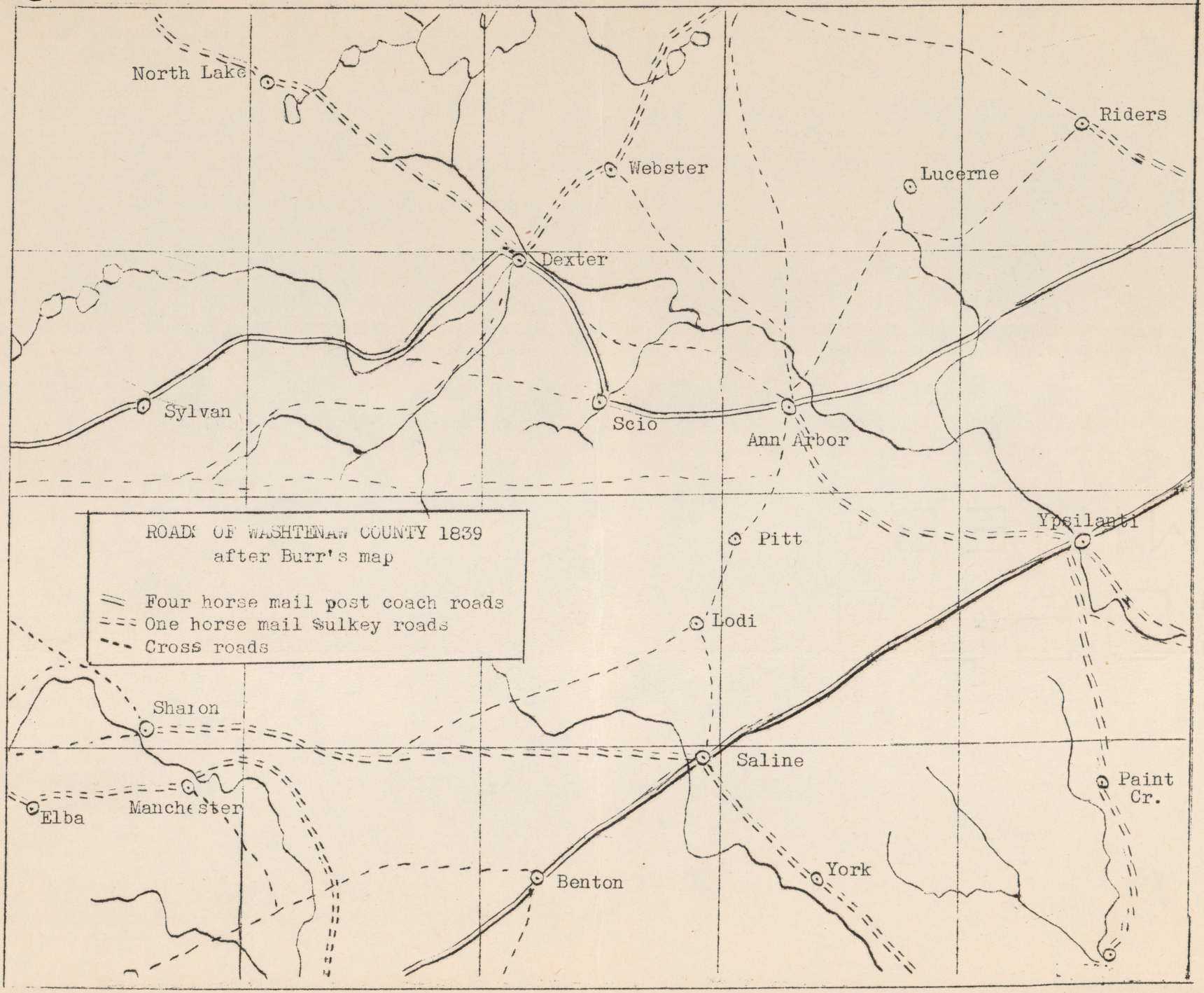
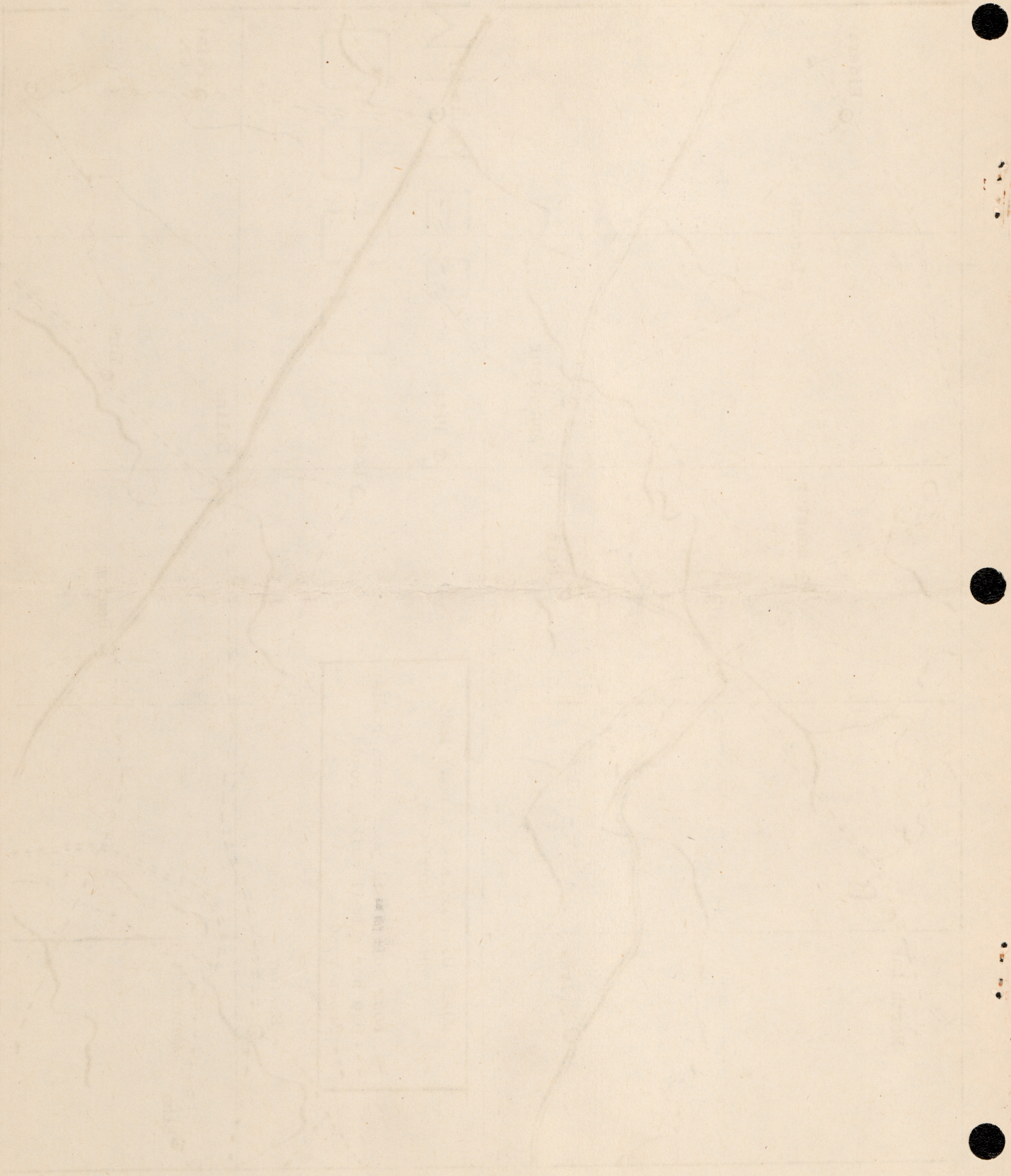
Mr. Henry says of this road,

A good example of a road kept up by a man having little or no knowledge of road making, but who for 18 years worked this road very satisfactorily though expensively. After his death it commenced to run down. The drainage is good, though the gravel is not well connected to the ditches so that the road is wet in spots. The toll house in good condition.

The tolls permitted to be collected from persons using the plank and gravel roads were at first based on each 10 miles, the specified distance between toll gates. The rates were 12½ cents for two horses and wagon, 20 cents for two horses and carriage, and half these rates for single rigs...In the act of 1848 the tolls were placed at 2 cents a mile for double rigs and 1 cent for single. In the first charter noted, 1837, for a timber road (the Plymouth and Ann Arbor Turnpike), no person was obliged to pay toll within five miles of his residence, but this is not mentioned in the succeeding charters.

On January 23, 1902, the Ann Arbor-Lodi toll road went out of business, This may be considered as marking the end of the era of early transportation in Washtenaw County by road.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
April 22, 1943


North Lake
Webster
Riders
Lucerne
Dexter
Sylvan
Scio
Ann Arbor
ROADS OF WASHTENAW COUNTY 1839
after Burr's map
Four horse mail post coach roads
One horse mail sulkey roads
Cross roads
Ypsilanti
Pitt
Lodi
Sharon
Saline
Paint Cr.
Elba
Manchester
Benton
York